THE OXFORD MOVEMENT AND VICTORIAN POETRY

BY

ELVA ARLINE McALLASTER

A. B., Greenville College, 1944
A. M., University of Illinois, 1945

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH
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R. UNIV. BIBLIOTHEEK LEIDEN

THE OXFORD MOVEMENT AND VICTORIAN POETRY

Through the poetry of any period the historian of *Geistesgeschichte* is able to make valuable observations regarding the intellectual climate of the time; conversely, only by knowing the background against which given poets thought and wrote is the literary historian able to see their works in the proper perspective. When either interpreter gives his attention to the Victorian era, he will find himself rewarded by considering the interrelationships between the Oxford Movement and the poetry of the period.

Poetry, wrote Francis Thompson, should be "the lesser sister and helpmate of the Church"; his phrase may well be used to express the philosophy of poetry held by the Tractarian leaders. Throughout the Movement their verse was one of their frequently used devices in a program of church reform. John Keble's *Christian Year* (1827), the harbinger of the Movement, stimulated loyalty to the Anglican Church, calling attention to her observances and urging a more serious practice of religion. In the spirited poems of *Lyra Apostolica*, J. H. Newman, Hurrell Froude, Keble, and others summoned support for Anglicanism and condemned encroachments upon the power of the Church. The personal piety in their poems indicated what manner of men the Movement claimed for its leaders.

After the publication of *Lyra Apostolica* one of its contributors, Isaac Williams, distinguished himself by continuing to write poetry in support of High Church doctrines—"in pursuance," he said, "of the same great object we had undertaken." His thick books of verse, now forgotten, introduced the party's views to readers who would never have investigated argumentative treatises. Another "Puseyite," Frederick William Faber, wrote a long (and dull) narrative poem, *Sir Lancelot* (1844), which he published, he said, in the hope that it might help his friends during the ecclesiastical crisis

of the time. His other volumes also evidenced his interest in church questions. Some of the poetry of John W. Burgon further illuminates the history of the Movement, with which he was associated during the years between Tract Ninety and Newman's secession.

The bifurcation of the Oxford Movement, after 1845, into Anglican Ritualism and Roman Catholicism was also illustrated in poetry, though less strikingly than were the earlier phases of the Movement. The carols, ballads, and hymn translations of a leading Ritualistic clergyman, John Mason Neale, came from the former, and the latter was represented by the Roman Catholic work of Newman and Faber as well as by Edward Caswall's hymns and Aubrey T. de Vere's verse. Newman's drama of death, "The Dream of Gerontius," is remarkable for poetic merit, but more remarkable for indicating his development from an earlier anti-Romanism; its philosophy is thoroughly Roman Catholic.

In the lives of those Victorian poets who are read and studied today—as Keble, Williams, and Faber certainly are not—one may observe almost every kind of response to the Oxford Movement, ranging from Tennyson's indifference and Browning's antagonism to Christina Rossetti's devout commitment to it. All of the major poets knew at least a little about the Movement, and in the poetry of each there are lines which have more meaning to the reader who is informed about it.

The absence of sympathy with Tractarianism, when that appears, is of course important historically for tracing an individual's intellectual biography. As a Cambridge man and a Broad Churchman,Tennyson was little drawn to Tractarianism; the questions it discussed were "of secondary or remote interest" to his circle, and he was in accord neither with its doctrines nor with its practice. There is, however, an interesting parallel between his and Newman's approaches to the problem of knowledge. It may be that he was reacting ad-

versely to Tractarian trends in his strictures against dogmatic creeds and in the anti-Catholic tone of some of his dramatic works.

Both Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning had been too closely identified with Dissenting backgrounds for the Oxford Movement to attract them. Before her marriage Mrs. Browning had become acquainted with "Puseyite" views and had rejected them thoughtfully, deciding that they were neither Scriptural nor in accord with her intuitive religious preferences. Robert Browning agreed with her thoroughly, and pleased her by the cogency of his anti-Tractarian arguments. His views were in his poetry most distinctly expressed in "Christmas Eve." Several of his recurrent themes were probably given a greater prominence because of Tractarianism, and both of the Brownings allude to it incidentally.

Clough and Arnold were closer to the early Oxford Movement than any other leading Victorian writers. During the contention it engendered Clough was persuaded by his Oxford tutor, William G. "Ideal" Ward, that he must "either believe nothing or accept the whole of church doctrine," and he took the former alternative, thereby changing the course of all his later life and work. Although Matthew Arnold entered Oxford as the son of Tractarianism's bitterest antagonist, he himself—an irresponsible, society-loving, deliberately tolerant undergraduate—gave little heed to its ideas. The literary beauty of Newman's preaching attracted him powerfully, however, and the sermons at St. Mary's, in conjunction with Newman's published prose, formed an indelible impression upon his thought. His general debt to Newman he acknowledged repeatedly. In the simple, clear diction of his poems as well as in some of his ideas there may be traces of Newman's impression upon him. His poems show slight resemblances to the work of several Tractarian poets.

The poets already mentioned—Tennyson, the Brownings, Clough, Arnold—were those who were acquainted with the

Oxford Movement during its early theological phase. Each of them in his own way rejected, firmly and thoroughly, its teaching. The succeeding writers—the Rossettis, Morris, and Swinburne—knew Ritualism, and each knew it very well, during their formative years. High Church training had an effect upon the style as well as the themes of these later poets.

Christina and Dante Gabriel Rossetti were instructed as children in the faith of their Anglican mother. About 1843 they encountered Tractarianism in the church which they attended, and Christina thenceforward allied herself with it. It gave to her an increased earnestness in personal devotion and a firmer discipline in conduct; as a writer she was both stimulated and repressed by religious principles. Her Anglo-Catholic faith gave to her subjects for her poetry and contributed to the artistic qualities of her writing, but it also restricted her outlook and kept her from devoting herself seriously to literary pursuits. Dante Gabriel Rossetti encountered the same influences as did Christina, and several Tractarians were among his professional associates. Although he himself gave no allegiance to the Movement, his background presumably had a part in his proclivity for Catholicism, in his choices of religious subjects, and in the sensuousness, richness, and symbolism of his work.

Both Morris and Swinburne were as boys ardent devotees of Anglo-Catholicism, and both expected to take Anglican holy orders. Morris encountered High Church influence during his secondary preparation at Marlborough College, and during the early part of his Oxford residence he was—together with his comrade, Edward Burne-Jones—a champion of the High Church position, attending daily services, reading *Tracts for the Times,* and patterning his life after the model set up in Charlotte Yonge's novel, *The Heir of Redclyffe.* Although he was for a time close to Roman Catholicism, by 1855 a preoccupation with art had for him completely replaced both religious enthusiasm and church loyalty. His plans to found a monastery contributed indirectly to "Morris and Co.,"

but only a few passages in his poetry show any direct evidence of his early ambitions. In a general way his ever-prevalent medievalism and the visual element in his poetry were probably derived in part from his association with Ritualism.

Swinburne acquired his early High Churchmanship, which he renounced completely at Oxford, through family environment. In several early poems there are traces of his commitment to Anglo-Catholicism, and he seems to have retained some imprint of his early years, as is indicated by occasional references to church rites and by his preoccupation, in one way or another, with ideas of God. His fierce anti-ecclesiasticalism may be mentioned also, for his early High Anglicanism had given him something against which to rebel.

For all of these major poets (with the exception of Christina Rossetti) it will be observed that association with the Anglican Revival ended in repudiation of it. For none of them was an acceptance of Roman Catholicism the logical and inescapable result of attention to its teaching. In decided contrast were several young poets at the end of the century for whom Anglo-Catholicism was what its Protestant opponents habitually called it: "The half-way house to Rome."

Digby Mackworth Dolben died before he was able to carry out his intention to enter the Roman Catholic communion, but his purpose was implicit in his poetry. (The Catholicism of his verse was, in fact, the reason that his Low Church family kept his manuscripts unpublished for years.) His religious fervor had stimulated his powers of composition, and his poems show both his ultimate position and the inner conflicts which had preceded final certainty.

Entering Oxford "tinged with liberalism," Gerard Manley Hopkins soon identified himself, through the influence of Pusey, Liddon, and others, with the High Church party. He did not stop there, however. His reading, associations, and habits of worship eventually brought him to clear and final conviction that the principles he had held and had identified

as "Tractarian" were to be found only in Roman Catholicism. For no other Victorian poet did religious faith have such a bearing on his work as for Hopkins. Entering the Jesuit order shortly after his conversion, he rigidly suppressed his creative powers lest he should infringe upon his spiritual vocation. The silence thus imposed was to some extent beneficial in enabling him to think through his theories of prosody, and through the unremitting tension between his religious dedication and his poetic powers, his poems achieved a unique intensity and power.

Several aspects of the Anglican revival converged to influence Lionel Johnson. He read *Tracts for the Times,* and shortly thereafter gave up his earlier antipathy to all creeds; he took delight in Ritualistic worship; he admired the later Ritualistic leaders whom he knew; and, above all, he reverenced Newman and knew thoroughly everything that Newman wrote. His poetry reflected his devotion to the past, his moral struggles, his Irish loyalty, and his piety; to each of these themes his Roman Catholicism contributed. Nor were distinctively Roman Catholic ideas absent from his work. Johnson was eager to bring others to the faith he had accepted, and it was a great satisfaction to him to have a share in the conversion of his friend Ernest Dowson, who also entered Roman Catholicism in 1891, presumably by way of Ritualism. Dowson was strongly attracted by elaborately beautiful worship. "I've become a Catholic," he once said, "as every artist must." His new faith did not affect Dowson deeply; in only four or five of his poems are there evidences of it.

One of the *fin de siècle* Roman Catholic poets, Francis Thompson, was not himself a convert, yet the Catholicism in his poems may be attributed indirectly to the Anglican Revival, for his parents had accepted Roman Catholicism through it during the ecclesiastically troubled 1850's. His friend Alice Meynell, on the other hand, chose Roman Catholicism for herself, deliberately and thoughtfully deciding that only in it could a satisfactory guide to morals be secured. She

had been brought to this decision by an enthusiasm, during her teens, for Ritualistic Anglicanism. Because of her change in faith she had access to friendships which were stimulating to a literary career. Many of her poems are derived directly from her faith, and these poems have, as a group, been adjudged her most typical and important compositions.

In reviewing the whole course of the century, one observes that the Oxford Movement brought into being a considerable body of verse which has historical interest although it is of little intrinsic merit, that it touched the work of each of the major Victorian poets to some extent, and that it made Roman Catholics of a gifted group at the end of the century. The total effect of the Oxford Movement upon English poetry may be said, very generally, to include a greater interest in questions of religious belief—the repercussion of Tractarian argumentation; some increment to existing tendencies toward medieval themes and toward rich, sensuous styles—the effect of Ritualism; more frequent uses of Catholic ideas and imagery—the result both of Anglo-Catholicism itself and the Romeward trend which it engendered; and an augmenting of religious feeling—the consequence of the total Oxford Movement and of all the trends to which it gave rise.

VITA

Elva Arline McAllaster was born at Marienthal, Kansas, on August 30, 1922. She received her elementary and secondary training in Kansas public schools and in the academy of Central College, McPherson, Kansas, from which she was graduated in 1938. After receiving a diploma from Garden City Junior College, Garden City, Kansas, in 1940, she taught for two years in rural schools in Kansas. In 1944 she received her A.B. degree from Greenville College, Greenville, Illinois, and was awarded a scholarship for graduate study at the University of Illinois. There she received the Master of Arts degree in 1945, was an Assistant in English during 1945-6 and the summer of 1946, and was subsequently a fellow in English for five semesters. She is a member of Alpha Kappa Sigma and of Phi Beta Kappa.